
'Strange Occurrences' Hold Meaning

By A Staff Reporter

ATLANTA — Coretta King still talks about the artificial flowers after all this time.

"It happened in March," she says, just a short while before he went to Memphis. "The doctor had ordered him to get some rest and so he was going away on a little weekend vacation trip. Before he left, he went out to buy a few clothes and that's when he sent the flowers. He called from the store and asked if I'd gotten them yet. I said, no, I hadn't.

"By the time he came home to get ready to go to the airport, the flowers had arrived. They were artificial red carnations. They were the ugliest flowers I had ever seen.

"He said, 'Oh, the flowers came.'

"I said, 'Yes, they're beautiful. But they're artificial.' He knew I don't like artificial flowers.

"He said, 'I wanted to give you something you could keep.'"

For Coretta King, it was one of a series of strange occurrences that, looking back, now seem to be fraught with meaning.

Within a span of eight weeks, King preached his own eulogy, told his parents that he might be murdered, and, on the eve of his death, delivered his "mountaintop speech" in Memphis in which he all but predicted his own end.

Mrs. King talked about all those things when she met with the press a few days before the 10th anniversary of her husband's death.

"Martin didn't say directly to me that it's going to happen in Memphis," she said, "but I think he felt that time was running out. I guess he began feeling strongly about the possibility of death in the early '60s. He'd say things like, 'I don't expect to survive the revolution; society's too sick.' I was aware that any campaign was a dan-

gerous one. But there was something a little different about Memphis."

Different in what way?

"Somehow you could sense that there was almost a desperation from those people who would really have liked to have gotten him out of the way. But there were other things. Feb. 4 was the Sunday he gave his own eulogy. I wasn't in church that day because the doctor had told me to take it easy. But Martin came home and told me about the sermon. He said, 'I told them what I wanted said at my funeral this morning.'

"You did?" I said.

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"Yes," he said, 'I called it The Drum Major Instinct.' Then, he re-preached the sermon. Preachers are like that."

The other thing that happened, she says, is that he had a talk with his parents about the possibility of his death. King's father, whose biography is excerpted this month in McCall's, says his son told them:

"There is a very good chance that... I might be murdered. Any day this could happen... You must be prepared, for I am not afraid. The reports are that they are out to get me."

Although all of the questions surrounding Martin Luther King's death have never been satisfactorily answered, Mrs. King is convinced that, eventually, everything will be known.

"This is just a feeling, sort of an intuition, that, in time, we will know," she says. "I have no idea when or how it will come. But I just have the feeling that my husband's cause was so just, that what he

stood for was so important... that we will know. I just hope I will live to see it."

At present, Mrs. King heads up the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change in Atlanta. Her primary interest right now is working for the passage of the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment bill. As co-chairman of a coalition to push the bill through, she is convinced that this will do more than any other single thing to solve the economic plight of the nation's blacks.

In fact, 10 years after her husband's death, she believes that the goal is jobs and that the way to get them is by lobbying. "That's where it's at, now," she says.

As for progress since '68, Mrs. King puts a lot of faith in political gains. "We had so few elected officials, then," she says. "Now, we have more than 4,000 blacks and other minority peoples in this administration. To me, that's progress. Also, we were able to elect a president in '76, and we've acquired political leverage through use of the ballot. I think that's progress. Finally, we have a full-employment bill. It's taken 10 years to reach this point, but, realistically, I think that's progress."

In other areas, however, she is not so sure that the country has advanced much since 1968.

When asked who, of all the black people in the field, might emerge as the first nationally elected public official, such as president or vice president, Mrs. King frowned.

"It isn't that I don't know the answer," she said, "it's that I have a problem saying

what I feel because I don't want it held against the person. I feel the forces of reaction in this country are so strong that any leader that seems to be gaining significant ground and moving ahead is in danger."

Asked what kind of danger, she said, "There's assassination of people's character's first, then, if that doesn't work, there's assassination of the person physically. We haven't had any assassinations, lately. But don't ever forget we had three major ones in this country and I think the seeds are still here."

Mrs. King told The Commercial Appeal that she will not come to Memphis April 4 to mark the anniversary of her husband's death. She said she will lay a wreath on her late husband's tomb as she does, officially, about four times a year — and that will be it.

"The beauty of the whole experience of Martin Luther King," she said, "seemed to be that his work was completed, and that he sort of rounded off his life in such a way that he had done what he could do. Now, you can say there was much more he could do. But the fact is, he had written those five books and if you read them it's all there, a blueprint, which, in many ways we have not caught up to him.

"He gave his life and the reason I can't mourn for Martin is because I think he was ultimately fulfilled. If you die in a struggle, that's a righteous cause and that death can become a redemptive force in a society. So if you start crying, you cry for yourself. You're not crying for him because he did his work, he lived well, and I think he was satisfied. I think if he had to choose the way to go he would have chosen the way he did. Because he wasn't trying to save himself."